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AUTHOR Dandy, Evelyn Baker

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ABSTRACT

The Pathways program at Armstrong Atlantic State University (Georgia) is taking non-certified school district employees who have exemplary work records, better than average grades, and a sincere commitment to teaching and offering them tuition and other support so that they can take college courses and earn degrees leading to teacher certification. The employees must maintain a grade point average of 2.5 or higher, and upon graduation remain employed by the local public schools for at lest three years. Faculty teaching in the program have been encouraged to emphasize techniques that work well with children in urban environments. All lesson plans include a statement of relevance and must focus on participatory activities with ample opportunities for oral language development. Assignments encourage the use of materials and resources available in most urban homes. Community site visits include local museums featuring the local history and the accomplishments of local residents. This project has been accomplished through the collaboration of representatives from three institutions in Savannah (Georgia): Armstrong Atlantic State University, Savannah State University, and the Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools. Four tables are appended. (JLS)

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Growing Your Own: A Model for Preparing Paraprofessionals to be Fully Certified Teachers in Urban Classrooms

by

Evelyn Baker Dandy, Ph.D.

They will be teachers, but to the kids they'll reach,
they'll be heroes. They'll give them hope. They'll give them
dreams. They'll change their lives. (Haselkorn & Fideler, 1996, p. 6)

Introduction

A child in Georgia can go from first grade to twelfth grade and never have a teacher from his/her home community. Imagine 12 years of schooling without a teacher who listens to the same music, watches the same television programs, enjoys the same foods, gains inspiration from the same kind of worship service or aspires to be like the same role models. The Pathways program at Armstrong Atlantic State University (AASU) is answering Georgia's call by taking non-certified school district employees who have exemplary work records, better than average grades and a sincere commitment to teaching and offering them tuition and other support so they can take college courses and earn degrees leading to teacher certification. In turn, they must maintain a grade point average of 2.5 or higher and, upon graduation, remain employed by the local public schools for at least three years.

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This effort is accomplished through the collaboration of representatives from three institutions in Savannah: Armstrong Atlantic State University, Savannah State University and the Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools. Although collaboration among these three units is an important facet of the program, this paper will focus on the connections between Armstrong and the local public schools.

AASU and the Local Public Schools

Founded in 1935, Armstrong is growing rapidly on its present 250-acre site on the coast of Georgia. AASU employs 235 full-time faculty and offers 75 degree programs to more than 5,400 graduate and under-graduate students. The College of Education moved from fourteenth largest out of 35 institutions in the state of Georgia producing teachers to seventh largest in 1996. It is the only university to offer education degrees in coastal Georgia. In 1995 AASU was first in the state among majority institutions in the number of minority students enrolled in student teaching, and it led all institutions when minority teaching interns were included in the count. While the University's minority enrollment has now approached 19%, in the College of Education, minorities account for 27%, a number that is progressively increasing with credit due largely to the Pathways Program.

Armstrong's teacher education graduates have a 97% pass rate on the required Georgia Teacher Certification Test. Twenty-two per cent of the teachers in Armstrong's service areas are AASU graduates, yet 52% of the individual school nominees for teacher of the year were graduated from AASU.

The Savannah-Chatham County Public School District (SCCPS) is a K-14 school district that serves 55,000 students, employs 2,500 teachers and staffs 44 schools as well as a district office, satellite facilities and community-based programs. The SCCPS teachers are categorized as 35% Black, 64% White and 1% other. Minorities make up approximately 66% of the student body, but 66% of the retentions, 80% of suspensions and only 59% of the high school graduates. SCCPS representatives serve directly on the advisory committee of the Pathways Program. These individuals have been most helpful in providing direction for the recruitment, screening and placement of graduates.

The Selection Process

Since a program is only as good as its students, the major strength of the Pathways program is its screening process. The Advisory Committee, composed of representatives from SCCPS, the University's College of Education and the School of Arts and Sciences, has designed the following criteria:

Program applicants must:

- Be classified as non-certified personnel
- Exhibit an exemplary work record at SCCPS
- Qualify for regular admission to the University
- Have a minimum grade point average of 2.0 on all previous college work
- Pass a required security check
- Declare education as their major
- Maintain a 2.5 grade point average (GPA) once in the program
- Commit to teaching in inner city schools
- Obligate to teaching at least 3 years after program completion

Preliminary applications, secured through the University or the SCCPS Department of Human Resources, include brief demographic data and require a 200-300 word essay on "Why I Want to Become a Teacher." A faculty committee from AASU's School of Arts and Sciences uses a blind scoring process for initial essays. Those whose essays do not pass are sent rejection letters. Applicants with passing essays are directed to complete secondary application packets that require them to describe an educational dilemma they have faced and submit three detailed performance recommendations from their immediate supervisor and two teachers in

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their current school.

The Screening Committee, composed of the Director, a principal, representatives from SCCPS Human Resources, the College of Education, the School of Arts and Sciences, and the Minority Affairs Officer, survey completed packets to determine which applicants will be invited for an interview. Applicants are rejected if they do not meet the preliminary requirements listed above.

During the interview, applicants are required to write an additional essay detailing how they plan to manage their schedule, if they should be accepted into the program. The interview is designed to assess oral presentation skills, leadership ability, level of commitment, and judgement in solving educational dilemmas. Applicants complete an oral reading designed to determine their ability to communicate with an audience. The Screening Committee votes on each applicant. Scholars are required to sign an acceptance form as well as a contract describing their obligations to the Program. The contract is countersigned by the Program Director and the SCCPS Executive Director of Human Resources.

Program Successes

From nearly 700 applications the committee has screened 78 "Scholars": 25 black males, 48 black females, 1 white male and 4 white

females. Since there is a serious shortage in this demographic group, particular emphasis is placed upon recruiting African American males. Information about the racial/ethnic and sex distribution of the Scholars is summarized in Table 1.

(Insert Table 1 here)

As shown, African Americans make up the largest subgroup (86%), and 6% are White. Males constitute 33% of the total and females 60%. Table 2 shows that 59% are married, with an additional 12% reporting they were separated, divorced or widowed and 29% reporting being single. The majority of the Scholars (70%), regardless of marital status, have children.

(Insert Table 2 here.)

The average number of the children per family is two, as shown in Table 3. Fifty-five per cent of the Scholars are pursuing bachelor's degrees and 45% have degrees and are seeking certification.

(Insert Table 3 here.)

AASU's Scholars have a 95% pass rate on the Georgia Teachers Certification Test with a mean collective score of 342.74. A score of 320 is passing. To date, 30 Scholars have graduated from the Program. Their collective GPA is 3.08. Twenty-five graduates are employed in SCCPS: 10 African American males, 1 White male, 11 African American females and 3 White females.

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Of the remaining graduates, one African American male is teaching part time at a local business college, one Black female is teaching in Atlanta, two serve as substitute teachers for SCCPS, and one-a White female-is currently unemployed.

(Insert Table 4 here.)

Three Scholars received their school's nomination for Sallie Mae First Year Teacher of the Year award and one Black male has been nominated as his school's 1997 Teacher of the Year. All Scholars who are teaching have received "satisfactory" ratings on the Georgia Teacher Observation Instrument. The Program has been cited by the University System of Georgia as one of the five best programs for student retention (92%).

The Pathways Program in Savannah was featured in a 30-minute television documentary sponsored by the National Education Association in the School Stories segment titled "The Drive to Teach" and aired on The Learning Channel on November 3, 1996 and January 5, 1997. Additionally, two 5-minute sound bytes entitled "Combatting Learned Helplessness" and "Mentoring" are available on the NEA website, and the documentary is available for purchase.

Elijah West, one of the early graduates, was awarded the Bill Smith Scholarship from the National Association for Alternative Educational

Preparation and Certification. The Director was awarded the local "Savannah Champions of Excellence Award" for leadership by the Board of Trustees of Savannah Country Day School. The Director and Scholars have presented papers at 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1997 AACTE conferences, the 1995, 1996 and 1997 Youth at Risk Conferences, First Annual Pedagogy of the Oppressed Conference, 1995 and 1996 Recruiting New Teachers Conferences, the Symposium on Recruiting Minority Teachers, two NEA Leadership Conferences, and the Georgia ACTE Conference.

Ed Daniels, a 1996 graduate, was recently featured in the two local newspapers. He has been instrumental in securing an AmeriCorps grant that provides after school mentoring and tutoring to 200 middle school students. Daniels has organized 18 volunteer tutors (college students) in local community centers to assist these at risk students with conflict resolution and direct them in community service activities. This "3:00 0' Clock Program" has documented increases in standardized test scores and a decrease in suspensions.

Unique Features of the Program

1. Friday replacements. This is a win-win arrangement for Scholars, their supervising teachers, school principals and AASU senior level education majors. Notices are sent to qualified majors who sign an

agreement to replace a given Scholar every Friday during the quarter. (The Program uses interest monies earned from the Grant to pay them $25.00 per week.) Scholars, released with full pay, are responsible for orienting their replacements, informing them of school regulations, providing plans, and reporting the number of hours their replacement worked. On Fridays the University offers two five-credit classes, oftentimes in one of the local schools. Scholars spend a portion of their time learning theory and the other portion in classrooms with children, putting theory into practice.

Principals are pleased with this arrangement because their most valuable paraprofessionals are replaced at no cost to the school, and they can observe potential student teachers. Education majors have an opportunity to engage in authentic classroom experiences and earn up to $100.00 per month. This arrangement allows Scholars to take a full load of courses, thus reducing the amount of time they are away from their own families.

2. How to Improve Your GPA Workshops. All Scholars whose GPA was a 2.5 or lower were identified and required to complete a series of tasks. Initially, each was counseled by the program director to determine their immediate goals and priorities. The College of Education counselor held a mandatory four-hour workshop on learning styles and study strategies.

Each Scholar met individually with the counselor and outlined a plan of action for GPA improvement. Grades were monitored very closely for four consecutive quarters. All Scholars were identified on mid-term roles, and faculty were asked to report any mid-term grade of C or below. Scholars whose grades were reported were required to schedule conferences with their professor to discern specific things they must do to improve. These Scholars were offered free tutoring, free copies in the library, and additional reference materials as well as mentoring by the Director and other Scholars who had taken the course. The DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Grant had also appropriated monies for an emergency fund designated to assist Scholars with unexpected emergencies such as child care, transportation problems and materials to support course work. After two quarters, Scholars who failed to improve their GPA were placed on probation and given two more quarters to improve. Those Scholars whose GPA continued to suffer were asked to leave the Program. Fourteen out of 22 Scholars exhibited GPA improvement. Six were asked to leave the Program, and two dropped out of the Program.

3. Building on Cultural Resources. The Program at AASU has developed a family-like atmosphere that uses cultural resources to provide

encouragement and inspiration to the Scholars. Workshops on topics such as "Moving from 'Para' to 'Professional,'" "Codeswitching to the Standard Dialect," "Managing Your Finances," and "1996 Revival" are held quarterly. Workshops begin and end with meditation during which all attendees join in a circle and hold hands. Home-cooked food is served, and gospel music is always a part of the program, frequently rendered by the Scholars themselves. Scholars are encouraged to bring their spouses and their children, for whom special sessions are provided. Incentive awards are presented at all meetings, and ample time is provided for Scholars to network among themselves to exchange ideas and share notes as well as resources. Additionally, Scholars are encouraged to form study groups and car pools and cooperate on baby sitting responsibilities. The Director has nurtured a climate of trust that encourages Scholars to talk though their problems and conflicts with her and with one another. The Pathways office serves as a haven for Scholars who come on campus and just want to share their news.

Graduates are often hired to provide tutoring for those who are still going through the Program. Special workshops allow the graduates to share their wisdom with brief role playing activities on such topics as "The Appropriate Way to Approach a Professor," "Preparing for the

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Interview," and "Techniques on Portfolio Development." Faculty who teach the Scholars are encouraged to emphasize techniques that work well with children who live in urban environments. All lesson plans must include a statement of relevance and focus on participatory activities with ample opportunities for oral language development. Assignments encourage the use of materials and resources available in most urban homes. Assessment incorporates affective as well as cognitive growth. Community site visits include several local museums that house collections featuring the rich history and accomplishments of local artisans.

Conclusion

Universities can significantly improve their recruitment, retention and graduation rates for minority students, and paraprofessionals can and do make exceptional teachers. Individuals involved in the leadership of such efforts must be dedicated to improving education in urban environments. Applicants must have exemplary work records, better than average grades, impressive speaking and writing skills, and commitment to teaching in urban environments. Programs that support such "Scholars" must provide financial support, faculty who are willing to lend counseling support, flexible scheduling, and theory into practice instruction that builds on the strengths of the community. Program directors must

maintain a good rapport with local school district officials, serve as campus advocate for the Scholars, provide ample opportunities for networking, develop incentives for program completion and build on cultural resources that inspire and encourage program participants. Grants such as those provided by DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest have made it possible to discern the necessary ingredients to develop a model that can be used by other universities to grow their own.

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TABLE 1
Racial/Ethnic and Sex Distribution of Pathways Scholars:
Armstrong State College

RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP	REPORTED 1994-95		ADMITTED 1995-96		CUMULATIVE TO DATE	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
White	5	6.7	0	0.0	5	6.3
African American/Black	66	88.0	3	60.0	69	86.3
Hispanic/Latino	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
American Indian/Other	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Dropout	4	5.3	2	40.0	6	7.5
TOTAL	75	100.0	5	100.0	80	100.0

SEX	REPORTED 1994-95		ADMITTED 1995-96		CUMULATIVE TO DATE	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Male	25	33.3	1	20.0	26	32.5
Female	46	61.3	2	40.0	48	60.0
Dropout	4	5.3	2	40.0	6	7.5
TOTAL	75	100.0	5	100.0	80	100.0

Source: Pathways Evaluation Data

Average age of Scholars:	39.1
median:	39.5
range:	25-51

Source: Self-reported on Fellow/Scholar Survey

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TABLE 2
Marital and Parental Status:
Armstrong Atlantic State University
(N=76)

MARITAL STATUS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Single	21	27.7
Married	45	59.2
Separated	2	2.6
Divorced	7	9.2
Widowed	1	1.3
Missing Date	0	0.0
Total	76	100.0
PARENTAL STATUS	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Participants with Children	54	71.1
Participants without Children	21	27.6
Missing Data	1	1.3
Total	76	100.0

Average number of children for Scholars who reported having children: 2.8
Source: Fellow/Scholar Survey
3/97

TABLE 3
Degrees Sought:
Armstrong Atlantic State University
(N=82)

DEGREES SOUGHT	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
BA	46	56.1
MA	0	0.0
BA & MA	0	0.0
Certificate Only	35	42.7
Other (unspecified)	1	1.2
TOTAL	82	100.0

Source: Participant Progress Form and Follow-up 3/97

TABLE 4

Completion, Certification and Placement of Participants: Armstrong Atlantic State University

PARTICIPANTS (TOTAL N= 79)		
STATUS	**NUMBER**	**PER CENT**
Completed Program	30	37.9
Certified	27	34.1
Hired in Permanent Teaching Position	25	31.6

Source: Participant Progress Forms and Follow-up

3/97